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The Role of Intuition in the Design of the Freshman Composition Curriculum

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Abstract

Intuition is a mode of thinking based more on sense and instinct than on logic and reason. It a somewhat suspect ability because it undermines our faith in reason and empirical research. But intuition can play a valid role in the design of the freshman composition curriculum. As a stereotypically feminine attribute, it complements current learning theory and is especially relevant in composition studies where women are well-represented. Moreover, philosophers and psychologists have validated the efficacy of intuitive decision-making. Intuition will not replace but can complement the roles of theory, research, and experience in curriculum design.

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The Role of Intuition in the Design of the

Freshman Composition Curriculum

The freshman composition curriculum is the product of five variables: theory, research, experience, tradition, and intuition. The textbook the teacher chooses to use exerts a significant influence on curriculum, of course, but the textbook is, itself, a product of these five variables. We teach what we teach because composition theory and research validate our pedagogy, because our past experiences tell us that a certain strategy which has worked well in the past should work well again, and because tradition dictates that certain instructional strategies belong in a writing course. But sometimes we teach what we teach because we *feel*, we have a *sense,* that it will work. We have an instinct or perhaps an unexpected idea or insight, which tells us that this particular class in this particular school in this particular semester will benefit from this particular pedagogy. We know intuitively that such an approach will be efficacious. Such intuitive decision should be fostered and encouraged, because it can make a valid and legitimate contribution to the design of the composition curriculum.

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What Is Intuition?

Intuition is knowledge and awareness based less on reason than on a sense or a feeling for what is right and true. It is, in short, non-rational thought. Westcott (in McLeod) defines intuition as "an especially high level of problem-solving where the problem is not always explicit or fully defined and the process of reaching a solution is not clearly defined in a set of steps—the solution is in fact reached in 'jumps' or 'intuitive leaps'"(94). Shirley and Langan-Fox define intuition as "a feeling of knowing with certitude on the basis of inadequate information and without conscious awareness of rational thinking" (564).

Intuition is not divine revelation. It is not a mystical experience though it has a mystic aura, in that it is often associated more with faith than reason. It is often a revelation, arriving suddenly and unexpectedly as a flash of insight, but it can also present itself to the conscious mind slowly and serenely. Intuition is exercised within a particular context, and this context influences its nature. The academic environment is conducive to intuitive moments related to teaching and learning (see McLeod, Chapter 5).

Knowledge, if not logic and reason, is a prerequisite to intuition. We cannot discover intuitively something about which we have absolutely no prior information or training (Shirley and Langan-Fox 571). Intuition is rooted in knowledge we already possess and knowledge that we seek. It is similar to an educated guess, but stronger because it is, as Shirley and Langan-Fox note, "characterized by intense confidence in the intuitive feeling" (564). It is, to a degree, an act of faith—but faith mediated by prior knowledge.

Although that knowledge might be imperfect, incomplete, or ambiguous, some awareness of it is prerequisite to useful intuitive decision making.

Wallis (in McLeod 100) notes that preparation and incubation precede an intuitive moment. We study a subject, then forget about it consciously while it incubates in our subconscious, until we are surprised by a moment of illumination or insight—the surprise being a defining (though not always essential) element of the intuitive experience.

Acting on intuition tends to make us uncomfortable. We want the instructional strategies we use in a writing course to be grounded in theory, experience, tradition, and research, because they have more status in the Academy than intuition has. In Western culture, at least, recognition of intuitive decision- making undermines our cherished faith in reason and empirical research. Intuition is suspect because it is too introspective, imbued, almost, with New-Age connotations. Intuition lacks the authority of theory, experience, and research because scholars spend much more time doing research, writing about theory, and reflecting upon their experience, than they spend exercising their intuitive faculties.

Ambiguous Research and Contentious Theory

But in disciplines where research is ambiguous and theory, contentious, intuition should thrive because it can mediate theory and research that is less than perfect. Written composition is one such discipline. Composition theory and research have not exactly served as shining beacons of advice for English teachers to follow. Indeed, the research is notoriously ambiguous and indeterminate. Studies can be cited either to

endorse or discredit virtually any pedagogy. There is research that supports the use of model compositions in the writing classroom and research that question the value of having students study, discuss, and attempt to emulate models of good writing. In the 80's, sentence combining was a widely-used instructional strategy, but, in due course, studies discrediting the efficacy of sentence combining began to appear. Direct instruction in the conventions of standard English—grammar, spelling, punctuation—has been out of favor for years, in the professional literature, if not in the classroom, but a recent issue of the *English Journal* revisited the teaching of grammar in articles overwhelmingly supportive. Freewriting has its supporters and its detractors. Peer conferencing is currently one of the most popular activities in the writing classroom, but not all research has endorsed the efficacy of peer conferencing. Some writing teachers make their students keep journals, arguing the more writing they do, the better writers they will become; others believe journal writing, usually graded casually, perpetuates bad writing habits.

Composition theory is equally ambiguous and contentious. Apparently the paradigm shifted years ago, and process won out over product. Yet many writing teachers use handbooks, which stress the production of a correct text, and new product-oriented handbooks are published each year. Text-based theory, the notion of writing as a craft, a basically linear process of assembling words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into unified whole essays is rare in our professional journals but alive and well in the classroom.

Another group of composition theorists see writing as a recursive cognitive process. This group believes that the writer's cognitive processes interact with the writer's

knowledge of how language functions as a medium of communication, and meaning emerges from this dynamic interaction between thought and language. Writing stimulates thinking which triggers drafting which leads to revision which triggers deeper thinking which initiates further revision. Writing is a recursive process, more like running a maze than a marathon.

Still other compositionists believe meaning is the product of social interaction. Writers are motivated by their desire to connect with their readers, and it is their sense of the readers' needs and expectations that controls their writing and determines its effectiveness. We write to proclaim our membership in a discourse community. A piece of written discourse is one contribution to a whole ecological language system.

Marxist and/or Feminist theory is also influential in the field, in the journals, if not yet in textbooks and classrooms. Marxist/feminist educators believe that the goal of a writing course, indeed of all education, is to force students to become aware of the inequitable distribution of power within their society and to work for the realignment of that power. In a Marxist classroom, students read and discuss the literature of oppressed people, women and minority groups especially, and write about their attitudes to this work. There is a confrontational element to Marxist pedagogy. Teachers believe in challenging their students' middle-class complacency, confronting their values and attitudes in the hope of making these students more radical.

But not all scholars in our field share these views and support a confrontational approach. Maxine Hairston, for example, vilifies radical theory and pedagogy. "It's a model that puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student"

(660). She accuses radical teachers of using the classroom as a platform for their own political views. Radical teachers counter that all classrooms are political, and that they are simply advocating an alternative political viewpoint. "Such claims," Hairston contends, "are no more than self-serving rationalizations that allow a professor total freedom to indulge personal prejudices and avoid any responsibility to be fair" (669). Writing teachers should make the classroom " a low-risk environment that encourages students to take chances" (670). Students should not be forced into a position on a current social issue and then be compelled to write about that issue unless they choose to do so. A writing course, Hairston concludes, should focus on students' own experiences and the writing they produce as they reflect upon the meaning of those experiences.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, researchers and theorists have shed much darkness on these issues and, if they continue, we will soon know nothing at all about them. In composition studies, researchers and theorists have shed some light on effective teaching but some dark shadows remain. Intuition can light these dark shadows. Indeed, intuition is an especially useful ability to cultivate in disciplines like written composition, disciplines within which an effective pedagogy cannot be prescribed because their research is ambiguous and their theory, contentious. Information about what constitutes an effective writing curriculum is ample and useful, but imperfect. Within such disciplines, intuition must thrive and may be exercised with confidence.

The Feminist Argument

There is also a feminist argument in support of the use of intuition in the design of the freshman composition curriculum. The argument does come with a controversial premise: that women are more intuitive than men. Noddings and Shore argue that there is no proof to confirm this premise, but they do acknowledge the strength of the assumption.

> The commonly held notion that intuition and artistic ability are linked suggests that women's traditional role in our society as the artist or seeker of beauty may have allowed the intuitive faculty to be developed more completely in women than in men. (38)

They also trace the belief that women are more intuitive than men back to ancient Greece and Rome.

If women are, indeed, more intuitive than men, we have, perhaps, an explanation for their prominence in the field of composition and rhetoric. Certainly, this prominence is apparent. Many of the best selling composition textbooks have been written by women; the work of women scholars is well represented in professional journals; women are highly visible at professional conferences. In my own department, twenty-eight of the forty-seven people who teach composition are women. The common explanation for the

prominence of women in the field is that composition and rhetoric have second class status, behind the study of literature, in many English departments and women, typically, are hired to do busy work, the work that is less prestigious though every bit as taxing. To be sure, there is truth in this explanation. But is it also possible that women are drawn to this field because it requires intuitive decision-making and so provides them with the opportunity to play to their strengths? Intuition is an appropriate ability to exercise in a discipline where collaboration, cooperation, and empathy—components of a feminist pedagogy—are currently ascendant (see Flynn).

The synthesis of arguments advanced here, with all of their debatable premises, is that as teachers of written composition, women are likely more resourceful than men, an hypothesis difficult to prove but one which many in the profession, men as well as women, might illustrate with anecdotal evidence. Engineering or business professors, mainly men, do not need to be particularly intuitive to teach their courses well. Engineering professors have hard science; business professors have the profit motive. They know what to do in the classroom to make their students functioning engineers and business people. We do not know with certainty what to do in the classroom to make our students better writers. We are not only trying to pass on a body of knowledge, we are trying, as well, to change behavior. We must make decisions that affect our curriculum, in part intuitively. If women are more intuitive than men, they may be better equipped to develop and implement an effective composition pedagogy under varying conditions and circumstances.

The Validity of Intuition

The role of intuition in discovering new ideas and insights which can be put to practical use (in the classroom, for instance) is well documented. The most famous example of the efficacy of intuition is the story of Archimedes, the Greek mathematician who discovered the principle that an object immersed in fluid loses in weight by an amount equal to the weight of the fluid displaced. Legend has it that the insight came to him suddenly and unexpectedly when he settled into his bath one day and noticed that the water level rose. He shouted "Eureka" and danced into the Athens streets wearing only his towel. We must do better than legend, of course, if we are to validate the efficacy of intuition.

Carl Jung was, according to Noddings and Shore, " the first modern psychologist to investigate and publicize the importance of intuition" (26). He believed that intuition was a valid, if non-rational and unconscious function of the human mind. He was more interested in explaining the nature of the intuitive process rather than investigating any educational applications. Indeed, he did not think of intuition as a particularly powerful analytical process, upon which decisions could be made. But by considering the role of intuition in psychoanalysis, he increased its prestige, pushing it away from the world of spiritualists and mystics and toward the world of the social sciences. "The generation of psychiatrists that followed Jung were able to build on his theories, which, although controversial, did not invite the ridicule that spiritualist or other mystical notions had" (27).

Psychiatrist Eric Berne developed an interest in intuition, while he was treating soldiers returning from the Second World War and realized he was exercising his own intuitive capacities when diagnosing their conditions. He defined intuition as "knowledge based on experience and acquired through sensory contact with the subject, without the 'intuiter' being able to formulate to himself or others exactly how he came to his conclusions" (in McLeod 94). McLeod compares Berne's intuitive diagnoses of his patients to an English teacher's intuitive ability to judge the quality of a student's essay based upon little more than a cursory glance (94). The teacher's direct knowledge of the quality of the essay may be inadequate, but the teacher's prior knowledge of student writing and experience grading papers activate the intuitive abilities necessary to render a valid judgement.

The work of the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl also did much to enhance the prestige of intuitive decision making. Phenomenologists believe that reality must be investigated as it is experienced, that reality is essentially subjective. Such a position insists that intuition is as valid and reliable as research, theory, experience, and tradition because to suggest otherwise would be to deny the reality of the intuitive experience and thereby to discredit phenomenology's essential tenet. To Husserl, intuition is "a source of authority…for knowledge" (in Noddings and Shore 31), not separate from but an integral part of the whole, which includes other knowledge sources such as theory, research, and experience.

The Gestaltists go a step further, arguing that this "whole" has properties greater than the sum of its parts. As we perceive reality, the Gestaltists argue, we seek connections that will establish balance, harmony, and unity in the objects of our perception. These

connections are sometimes established intuitively. Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer calls this connecting process "seeing the light," (in Noddings and Shore 35), a term which is often used synonymously with intuition. Wertheimer believed that logic alone could not establish reason, that non-rational modes of thought make valid contributions. Gestalt psychology validates intuitive decision-making in two ways: to Gestaltists, intuition is both a component part in our perception of reality and a strategy to call upon in perceiving reality's unity, that is in perceiving the gestalt.

Jerome Bruner is one of the great champions of the role of intuition in education. The thrust of his work is to encourage teachers to teach intuitive thinking to their students as a legitimate journey towards knowledge, but he does extend his enthusiasm to urge the application of intuition to other areas, including curriculum development. He argues that non-analytic heuristic methods are as valid as analytic thinking in discovering truth. "Intuition," he writes, "implies the act of grasping the meaning or significance or structure of a problem without explicit reliance on the analytic apparatus of one's craft" (102). Here again, a prominent educator suggests that theory and research, "the analytic apparatus" of a discipline, are not the only basis upon which to make important decisions regarding "one's craft."

The power of intuition in the decision-making process has been well established. Intuition has a valid and legitimate role to play in the design of a freshman composition curriculum, and most composition teachers will admit that they sometimes make pedagogical decisions intuitively. They *sense* sentence combining exercises will work well for this particular class but peer conferencing won't; they *feel* students will respond

well to this topic; *instinct* tells them holistic grading will help students more than analytic grading on this particular assignment. Given the ambiguous and contentious nature of the advice from leading experts, and given the current interest in feminist pedagogy, intuition should become an accepted and encouraged part of curriculum design. Writing teachers, young ones without a lot of experience to draw upon and experienced ones constantly working to improve their practice, can make instructional decisions based upon intuitive insight and, in so doing, add one more strategy to their repertoire of methods to improve student writing.

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